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## THE SEMANTICS OF FEMALE DEVALUATION IN IGBO PROVERBS\*

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**ABSTRACT** The paper focuses on the semantics of female subjugation and derogation in Igbo proverbs. Proverbs, as forms of figurative communication with didactic functions in studied conversations were found to possess evidences of male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society. The representations of womanhood in Igbo proverbs are mainly negative: women are typically portrayed as being senseless, morally debased, devilish, childish, and weak. The fact that these stereotypes have been encoded in a form of communication usually respected and highly valued in Igbo culture suggests the degree rhetoric in the society has been masculinized. Studies in oral literature, especially in male-dominated cultures, need to pay attention to the role of male-oriented rhetoric in Igbo proverbs that signifies prejudice and hostility toward women in social discourse.

**Key Words:** Proverb; Masculinity; Femininity; Language; Rhetoric.

*The inertial mass of language is like the inertial mass of society. Women inherit their place as speakers inherit their words. We drag a vast obsolescence behind us even as we have rejected much of it intellectually, and it slows us down ... The gun of sex-biased language may be rusty, but it is there, and the greater danger is unawareness that it is a gun, and is loaded.*

Dwight Bolinger (1987)

## INTRODUCTION

Igbo traditional philosophy of language holds that it is produced and consumed by individuals. This is represented in an Igbo proverb-about-proverbs<sup>(1)</sup> which says: “*Ilu bu mmanu e ji eri okwu* (Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten)”. But if proverbs are used in “eating” the meaning in verbal interaction, it is very necessary to pay attention to the semantic and rhetorical qualities of these proverbs and how such qualities are utilized by individuals in producing meanings that others may consume to their own “health” or “ill-health.”

Literature on Igbo and African proverbs have mainly focused on their positive cultural functions and how competence in the use of proverbs reflects the possession of cultural wisdom and rhetorical skill. Some cultural functions identified in these studies are: “masking” speaker’s meaning (Monye, 1990), expressing it “in the most unobtrusive, innocuous and economic manner” (Owomoyela, 1981); acting as “guide lines for successful action and living” (Nwala, 1985); and presentation of “the voice of the people” (Ikenga-Metuh, 1983). Investigations on the use of proverbs in African creative writing have also focused on their positive values. Nwachukwu-Agbada (1990), in a study of Chinua Achebe’s use of proverbs, for

instance, drew attention to the writer's enlistment of proverbs in addressing community-spiritedness (solidarity) of the Igbo characters; reflections on the relationship between "Man" (sic) and God, parents and their offsprings; and expressions of the people's view on status and achievement in life, survival, humanness and duality in life.

While these studies are admittedly insightful, they unfortunately maintain silence on the ideological and subjective possibilities of meaning-making in proverb-oriented rhetoric. They overlook the fact that, in the male-dominated Igbo culture particularly, and in some other African cultures as well, proverbs are appropriated by men to uphold themselves as producers and custodians of knowledge which women are thought to be incapable of. One study that has in honesty acknowledged that these Igbo proverbs show some user-unwisdom in representing women, is Udobata Onunwa's "Femininity in African Cosmology: Paradoxes and Ambiguities" (1992). That women are negatively portrayed in Igbo proverbs is not surprising, for, as Dick Leith (1987) has argued, "Groups who occupy a subordinate or oppressed position in society invariably suffer from linguistic disparagement" in the hands of other groups that possess power.<sup>(3)</sup> Patriarchal systems as oppressive forces generate meanings that disparage women. The objective of this paper is to show that Igbo proverbs produce meanings that are sexually derogatory, and that in the milieu, one of the ways the patriarchal system has tried to invigorate and sustain itself is through the craft of proverbs which always mean more than they say as culturally-valued modes of oral education and semiosis.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: section II presents discusses my theoretical orientation, section III presents the methodology, section IV presents qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data, and section V examines the implications of the findings and conclusions.

## THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

I recognize the discomfort some Africanists feel over the application of the so-called Euro-based theories in analyzing African issues and situations, and also the attempts at domesticating such theories. Whereas there may be some sense in these inclinations, I believe that, if we do not want to be evasive, we should look more closely at theories and use only what is usable in them. The present study therefore utilizes insights by feminist poets such as Julia Kristeva (1981, 1993), Luce Irigaray (1985, 1992), Helene Cixous (1994), Dale Spender (1992), Annie Leclerc (1992), Virginia Woolf (1979), and Deborah Cameron (1985). These feminist poets, in sum, have argued that language has been a site for sexual politics played by the male to female disadvantage. Irigaray (1992), for instance, in "Women's Exile," argued that language was not "neutral with regard to differences between the sexes" but that it has been masculinized (80). Using the psychoanalytical orientation, Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, have tried to show that movement out of the imaginary semiotic (the pre-symbolic *Khora* or matrix for the womb) into the masculine symbolic which repressed expression of link with the maternal, was indeed a traumatic experience for woman. Meanings that are constructed in the masculine order are only such

that would sustain and perpetuate the patriarchal system, and need to be interrogated.

I will use the above valuable insights by feminist poet to complement discourse theory on “facework.” A current theory of “facework” by Lim and Bowers (1991) explains that individuals (and groups) have certain “face wants” which include “fellowship face” (“the want to be included or to be seen as a desirable member of society”), “competence face” (“the want that their abilities be respected”), and “autonomy face” (“the want not to be imposed upon”). These face wants are sometimes violated in discourse,<sup>(2)</sup> whereas interactants, as Cegala (1981) has suggested, are supposed to maintain protective and defensive “face orientations” saving face for the other and for self respectively since both orientations are “the cement that binds individuals together as social unit.”

## METHODOLOGY

In pursuing the objective of the study, data comprising fifty Igbo proverbs relating to womanhood were collected from both rural and urban discourse contexts (hence forth RC and UC respectively) between July 1992 and March 1993. Since proverb usage and interpretation are context-sensitive (Nwala, 1985; Monye, 1990), the collection was restricted to situations in which the proverbs were actually used by Igbo speakers. In all, thirty-two contexts of verbal interaction (sixteen RC and sixteen UC) were used as sources of data.

The contextual approach also made it possible for certain relevant features of the verbal interactions, namely, the sexes of the proverb users and audiences, the subject matters, and tenors of discourse, to be observed and recorded to assist the analysis. Both male and female subjects used female-related proverbs in both the RCs and the UCs. For the sake of convenience in the analysis, each proverb was coded/identified according to the sex of its user, while the context was further identified either as same-sex verbal interaction (SSV) or as mixed-sex verbal interaction (MSV).

It was, of course, somewhat difficult to predict when a speaker would use a proverb that directly or indirectly related to womanhood, the only slight exception being in cases where womanhood was the subject matter. In some cases, proverbs relating to womanhood were not used at all. Thus the collection of data was slightly prolonged.

However, this problem was not considered serious, as it did not affect the objective of the study.

The proverbs were also coded in three categories for face-threatening potentials: face-threatening (FT), non-face-threatening (nFT) and Neutral (N), and were submitted to three literate Igbo women (one feminist, one culturalist and one liberal scholar) for reading and confirmation. All the three readers accepted the ratings of the face-threatening potentials in the proverbs, except in five cases, which were later reconciled as being neutral. The ratings were adjusted accordingly.

In the analysis that follows, both quantitative and qualitative techniques will be employed, since, apart from showing the strategies and devices used in constructing the image of woman and her social positioning, it would be necessary to support the

textual analysis with statistical evidence on sex differences in the choice and use of female-related proverbs.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

References to woman(hood) in the proverbs operate on two semiotic planes – the allusive plane, which correlates with the remote situation, and the interpretive plane, which correlates with the (f)actual situation.<sup>(4)</sup> These planes and situations are essentially interactive in proverbial communication. As Monye (1990) has rightly stated,

*When people use proverbs there is always some relationship between two situations being compared: the proverb statement and its referent in the social context. It is this concatenateness between the human experience and another which gives proverbs their relevance.*

There is thus an analogical function, which is basically cognitive, in the use of proverbs. Chilton (1988) has referred to this kind of analogical reasoning in verbal communication as “metaphormorphism.” This morphism requires seeing one thing in terms of another, or the mapping of one script (the known) on to another (the unknown) so as to make the latter known. In this case, the fictive or remote script is assumed to have the warrant of cultural acceptance. As Monye (1990) wrote, “To them (the proverb users) the remote experience has become part and parcel of their mores and values, their common view of the world,” (4) and so by referring to them, the proverb users assume that the audience accepts the cultural validity of the analogy.

The images or representations of women on both the allusive and interpretative planes therefore merit equal attention, since both reveal the place(ment) of woman in the patriarchal culture. However, it is on the allusive plane that representations of womanhood are predominant in the proverbs, which suggests that womanhood itself is an important aspect of the “social semiotic” (Haliday, 1993).

Generally, the allusive plane yields a dualistic view of woman: the positive and the negative. The positive dimension shows the promotion of face for woman, as could be seen in the following:

- i. *Nne nwata lo ahia o di ka nke ibe ya agaghi alo.* (when a child’s mother returns from the market, it looks as if another child’s mother will not).  
(Appendix #30)

The joy of motherhood in Igboland and in many African societies is often strengthened by the mother-child bond. The child is very dependent on the mother and by habit expects to receive (good things) from her. One of such typical contexts of giving and receiving between mother and child is that of a mother’s return from market. The child in such a case would, by habit, expect to be given snacks, for instance *akara* (bean cake) and groundnuts bought at the market. In psychoanalytical terms, the proverb could be seen as (indirectly) evoking the maternal bond which, as Kristeva (1981, 1993) and other psychoanalytically-orientated feminists have argued, are suppressed by the masculine symbolic order. These psychoanalysts

have also argued that men exhibit two attitudes – desire or approach and withdrawal or fear – towards the *Khora*. In platonic philosophy, this *Khora* is the cave of fear, the symbol of barbarity and crude nature from which mankind should be delivered. And as Irigaray (1985, 1992) in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* has argued, this platonic fear leads to man's attempts at suppressing or severing the maternal bond (Sellers, 1991). But the maternal presence cannot be forgotten, and the pre-Oedipal rhythms that interrogate patriarchalism continue to echo, as in the proverb cited above. In fact, in one folk song children sing in Igboland, the image of the mother as selfless giver is also presented to question patriarchalism:

*Nne na-enye mgbe o ji agu m-o,*  
*Nna na-enye m ogubiga*  
*O gubiga o were weta ya-o,*  
*Uta m gba ya, gba ya*  
 (Mother gives when I hunger for it,  
 Father gives me when-the-hunger-is-over,  
 When the hunger is over he brings it,  
 Hit him, my arrow, hit him)

The image of the selfless giver, which is presupposed in example (i), signifies motherhood as desirable, and thus addresses the fellowship face wants of woman as mother.

In the mixed-sex verbal interaction in which the proverb was used (by a female speaker), the positive valuation of motherhood and the allusive/fictive situation of a mother returning from the market provide validity for the indirect message – that fortune is not one person's exclusive possession.

In this case, the positive image of motherhood becomes a mode of cognition and of creating optimism for the interactants.

The woman is also portrayed in the proverbs as being wise, or as somebody from whom one could learn lessons of life. In the following proverb, for instance, an old woman is portrayed as a sage:

- ii. *Nwaagadi nwanyi na-ari ugwu, ukwu wee fuba ya ufu. O wee si ugwu na o weta jekata-ukwu-afuba-ufu, ya eweta nodu-ala-zuo-ike.* (An old woman was climbing a hill and started having waist pains after some time. Then she told the hill that if it brought walk-along-and-then-have-waist-pain, she would (also) bring sit-down-and-rest). (Appendix #38)

In this narrative proverb, the ability of woman to exercise her mental capacities is recognized. This is indeed noteworthy, especially as in the same Igbo culture, women are sometimes derogated as “children” who are incapable of independent thought. It seems, however, that this acknowledgement of the possession of wisdom, which is a promotion of competence face wants, derives from the cultural association of age with wisdom, and not (merely) on the basis of intellectual empowerment of woman. Indeed in Igboland, old women are accorded greater respect and granted more rights than younger women. (This again seems to give the impression that women are growing persons, and have to grow to meet the standard already attained by men).

As could also be seen in example (iii) below, the age of a woman is an important

factor in the acknowledgement of her competence:

- iii. *Nwaagadi nwanyi anaghi echefu egwu o muru n'agbogho* (An old woman never forgets the dance she learnt (how to dance) in her youth).  
(Appendix #42)

The fact that the old woman (still) remembers or knows the dance suggests her possession of admirable mental capacity.

The positive images of womanhood used in the analogical frames of Igbo proverbs are, however, undermined by a preponderance of negative images that also occur in many other proverbs used in Igbo discourse. These images, which are used in the proverbs as valid cultural constructions, in fact seem to justify the feminist linguistic claim that language as it exists in patriarchal culture has been greatly masculinized and is used by man in alienating woman, in emphasizing her difference, and in maintaining his dominance. In the sexist Igbo proverbs, women are portrayed as being childish, irresponsible, foolish, weak, unreliable, wicked, dangerous and generally inferior to men. Also, they are suggested as sexual objects.

In the narrative proverb (iv) below, mother and daughter are characterized as being very infantile in their reasoning:

- iv. *Nwa-agbogho Ugwuta si nne ya na otu nwoke ka ya na-agara onwe ya, o wee tuburu ya raa. Nne ya wee si ya gaa rakwuru. O gaa, a rachie ya ozo.* (An Ugwuta (Oguta) girl told her mother that as she was going on her way, a man came and threw her down and sexed (raped) her. Her mother told her to go and retaliate. She went, and was sexed (raped) again.

The proverb presents the sexual vulnerability (helplessness or powerlessness) of women, which she fails to recognize to her own detriment due to her assumed weakness in reasoning. It is obvious in the narrative that woman is marked as different by virtue of her biological distinction, her possession of a vagina. This difference, in the masculine/patriarchal symbolic, suggests inferiority since the vagina is considered powerless. The part (vagina) is coalesced with the whole, woman. Lacanian psychoanalysis has sought to show the loss woman suffers due to her non-possession of penis, where the phallus “stands both for the lost object/(m)other and for the act of signifying this” (Sellers, 1991). As Toril Moi (1994) has pointed out, Kristeva for one were eloquent in her rejection of the relation of “biological sex” to “essentialism.” Her position therefore deconstructed “the opposition between masculinity and femininity and ... necessarily challenges the very notion of identity” (12).

The narrative of woman's sexual difference by the male speaker in (iv) indicates a callous construction of woman's subjective position and her inferiorization. Sex (coitus) for man thus signifies woman's defeat. In (v) below, this sense of victory promotes male ego:

- v. *Anaghi atu ikpu ukwu egwu maka na o bughi ya gaara ownwe ya.* (One cannot be afraid of the wide vagina because it cannot sex itself). (Appendix #35)

The vagina (woman) is portrayed as not just helpless but dependent on penis (man). This dependence also suggests her ownership by man:

- vi. *Nwanyi buru ohu, o si raba ya, na ohu bu ohu ya, ma mgbe o puta okwu, a choba onye nwe ohu.* (A woman carrying a vagina would ask to be sexed, that the vagina is her own, but when it causes trouble, the (real) owner (of the vagina) would be looked for). (Appendix #33)



Woman, the “sexual object,” is thus disempowered. She cannot think and act properly: somebody (man) has to guide her and prevent her from destroying herself! This assumption is related to the representation of woman as being irresponsible and unconcerned with her own good. In proverb (vii), this irresponsibility is linked with love for vanity:

- vii. *A na-echere ogeri, o na-eche okwa uri ya.* (One would be thinking of a woman's good but she would be thinking of her make-up platter (kit)).

(Appendix #32)

The impersonal pronoun “A” (“One”) seems to be used in the proverb in tactically obscuring the sex of the agent. But the fact that the affected is woman (“ogeri”) and the proverb user is male could be seen as presupposing man to be the agent. On the other hand, why is it woman (“ogeri”) that is chosen as the irresponsible in the formulation of the proverb? Is it not a way of making woman actually a sufferer in the culture? Man as speaker selects those elements of signification which, directly and indirectly, would sustain androcentrism. Thus the selection of the woman to signify the irresponsible subject in proverb (vii) above depends on the presupposition that the audience would be able to refer to the stereotypes of womanhood assumed to be shared knowledge in the culture. As McConnel-Ginet (1988) argued, however, in using “woman” with associated meanings, a speaker assumes the audience shares those (biased) meanings with him, even when the latter does not.

Furthermore, the use of the impersonal pronoun “A” (“One”) in the proverb could also be seen as a function of taken-for-grantedness. In this regard, the “ogeri” (woman) is expressed as a marked form, while man, as a given, need not be expressed because he is assumed to be the custodian of thought and guidance in the culture. And indeed in traditional Igbo culture, as Nwala (1985) pointed out, whenever there is an argument, particularly that which relates to culture and tradition, “the woman gives in to the man's view on interpretation” since the man is regarded as being “higher ... in the ontological order”.

Such denial of women's right to interpret the culture is based on the assumption that women are unreliable. And indeed there are some Igbo proverbs that portray women as unreliable and unfaithful:

- viii. *Onye jiri nwanyi buru ibu bu isi-adighi aju.* (Any person who uses a woman (as a pad) in carrying a luggage is carrying the luggage without a pad).

(Appendix #5)

- ix. *Eri ago mere umunwanyi agbala afufu onu.* (Due to their habitual denial of favours they receive, woman do not grow beards).

(Appendix #1)

- x. *A na-emere nwanyi, o na-emere onye di ya mma.* (One would be doing good to woman and she would be doing good to whoever she (truly) loves).

(Appendix #4)

In the examples above, are the positioning of man as agent (of righteousness) and a given in his relationship with the woman. The woman is positioned/marked as “sinner.” This is simply an expression of binary logic which, as Helene Cixous (1994) said in “The Newly Born Woman,” is a primordial masculine means of constructing models of sexual difference (37-40). It also reflects primordial hostile imagination in which difference is re-interpreted as potential threat, as Sam Keen (1986) argued in *Faces of the Enemy*.



It is also necessary to observe that the sex-biased proverbs themselves are too illogical to be even seen as cultural models of “wisdom.” Proverbs (viii) to (x) are clearly faulty generalizations and could have originated as one man’s illogical conclusions which other people, who also have gender prejudices, have come to accept as aphorisms. If some women have been unreliable and unfaithful, to say that (all) women are unreliable and unfaithful is *non sequitur*.

Also in (ix), there is an evidence of the mythification of the woman. The oversimplification of causality in the proverb indeed shows us the extent to which sex-biased proverbs can be accepted as expressions of folk truth and wisdom! They indeed insult and deconstruct the validity of logical reasoning in the culture.

The expression of the anti-woman bias in Igbo proverbs suggests patriarchal inferiorization of woman (hood). There is in Igbo culture a strong masculine presence which imposes its interpretations of the world on discourse. Such interpretations become established “facts” which are presupposed in discourse. One such operations of masculine presupposition could be seen in the proverb, “*O naghi adi mma a gbachaa oso ka nwoke e bie ya ka nwanyi*” (“It is not good to end a race *like a woman* after running it *like a man*” (emphases added).<sup>(5)</sup> The similes (“like a woman,” “like a man”) suggest the speaker’s reference of his audience to the stock assumptions about differences between “man” and “woman,” which are again assumed to be shared (cultural) knowledge. The differences in this case are the sexist connotative meanings attached to manhood and womanhood: man as “strong,” woman as “weak;” man as “noble,” woman as “depraved;” man as “rational,” woman as “irrational,” etc.

In the use of the female-related proverbs, however, there are certain sex differences which are noteworthy. Generally, male speakers (MU) used more female-related proverbs than female speakers (FU) in both the RC and the UC, as could be seen in Table 1.

This is not surprising since it is claimed in the Igbo culture that proverb use is a male art, and men indeed have tried to make proverb a sex-specific speech form, and by so doing consolidate their superior cultural and ontological position. Also, in the contexts where these proverbs are used in rhetoric (mainly meetings of the kinsmen), women are hardly allowed to be present, except where the issues at stake affect them, for instance in judicial situations. In other words, there are not enough provisions in the culture to enable women to learn and to use proverbs.

Table 2 also shows that the use of these proverbs were higher in same-sex verbal interactions (SSVs), and, again, MU scored higher (49.15%). The difference

Table 1. Use of Female-Related Proverbs According to Context and Sex.\*

	RC	UC	TOTAL
MU	36 (62.07%)	15 (25.86%)	51 (87.93%)
FU	4 (6.90%)	3 (5.17%)	7 (12.07%)
TOTAL	40 (68.97%)	18 (31.03%)	58 (100%)

\*RC = Rural Context; UC = Urban Context; MU = Male Users (of proverbs);

FU = Female Users (of proverbs).

Table 2. Use of Female-Related Proverbs by Male and Female Speakers in SSV and MSV.\*

	SSV	MSV	TOTAL
MU	29 (49.15%)	23 (38.98%)	52 (88.14%)
FU	2 (3.39%)	5 (8.48%)	7 (11.86%)
TOTAL	31 (52.54%)	28 (47.46%)	59 (100%)

\*SSV = Same-Sex Verbal Interaction; MSV = Mixed-Sex Verbal Interaction;

MU = Male Users (of proverbs); FU = Female Users (of proverbs).

between MU score in SSV and in MSV is not much. This seems to point to the fact that men, by virtue of patriarchal dominance, exercise much freedom in proverbial references to and commentaries on women even when interacting with the latter.

Table 3, similarly, shows that there is little difference between MU-SSV and MU - MSV in RC.

It was in UC rather that the use of the proverbs in MU-SSV was lower than in MU-MSV (5.26% to 17.54%). This seems to indicate the measure of restraint exercised by MU in MSV in UC where I would expect to have more enlightened individuals and higher sensitivity to sexist language.

In fact, as Table 4 shows, male speakers in MSV in RC used more proverbs that threatened the face of woman than their UC counterparts. Also, female speakers in both RC and UC abstained from the use of face-threatening (FT) female related proverbs. Their choices were either non-face-threatening (nFT) or Neutral (N). This may indicate an awareness in the women of the fact that their use of such sex-biased proverbs was self-denigrating. This, however, may not completely rule out the possibility of the use of female-derogating proverbs by some women, particularly in the RC context where their use of such proverbs would be seen by some men as a sign of humility and conformity with the institutionalized masculine voice.

From the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the use of the female-related proverbs in Igbo discourse, it is clear that there is a greater tendency to inferiorize women and emphasize their difference negatively, but illogically.

Table 3. Relation of User-Interaction Type Context.\*

	MU-SSV	MU-MSV	FU-SSV	FU-MSV	TOTAL
RC	18 (31.58%)	19 (33.33%)	2 (3.51%)	2 (3.51%)	41 (71.93%)
UC	10 (17.54%)	3 (5.26%)	0 (0%)	3 (5.26%)	16 (28.07%)
TOTAL	28 (49.12%)	28 (38.60%)	2 (3.51%)	5 (8.77%)	57 (100%)

\*MU-SSV = Male Users in Same-Sex Verbal Interaction;

MU-MSV = Male Users in Mixed-Sex Verbal Interaction;

FU-SSV = Female Users in Same-Sex Verbal Interaction;

FU-MSV = Female Users in Mixed-Sex Verbal Interaction;

RC = Rural Context; UC = Urban Context.

Table 4. % Rating of the Face-Treatening Potentials of Female-Related Proverbs in RC and UC\*

	FT	nFT	N	TOTAL
MU-SSV	15.52	0	1.72	17.24
MU-MSV	3.45	0	3.45	6.90
Sub-total	18.95	0	5.17	24.14
FU-SSV	0	0	0	0
FU-MSV	0	3.45	1.72	5.17
Sub-total	0	3.45	1.72	5.17
UC Sub-Total	18.97	3.45	6.90	29.31
MU-MSV	20.69	3.45	6.90	31.04
MU-MSV	22.41	1.72	8.62	32.76
Sub-total	43.10	5.17	15.52	63.79
FU-SSV	0	3.45	0	3.45
FU-MSV	0	3.45	0	3.45
Sub-total	0	6.90	0	6.90
RC Sub total	43.10	12.07	15.52	70.69
Grand total	62.17	15.52	22.41	100

\***RC** = Rural Context; **UC** = Urban Context; **FT** = Face Threatening;

**nFT** = non-Face Threatening; **N** = Neutral; **MU-SSV** = Male Users in Same-Sex Verbal Interaction;

**MU-MSV** = Male Users in Mixed-Sex Verbal Interaction;

**FU-SSV** = Female Users in Same-Sex Verbal Interaction;

**FU-MSV** = Female Users in Mixed-Sex Verbal Interaction.

## IMPLICATION OF THE FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The inferiorization of women in Igbo proverbs affects both the use of proverbs in the culture and male-female relationship in Igboland. In the first place, sex-bias in the use of proverbs clearly undermines the integrity of the latter as expressions of folk wisdom. For proverbs in the society to be worthy of the metaphorical description, “*mmanu e ji eri okwu*” (“palm oil with which words are eaten”), they have to be humanely processed and used and this requires the interrogation of and opposition to the expression of sex bias.

The Igbos say, “*Uche bu akpa; onye o bula ko nke ya*” (“Wisdom is a bag; everyone carries their own”), they also ask, “*Dibia na-eghe otoro, o chebere ike ya n’elu?*” (“A medicine man that causes diarrhoea, did he position his anus towards the sky?”). The derogation and denigration of womanhood by men in their use of Igbo proverbs also suggest men as being dominance- and hostility-oriented. In other words, men (the producers and users of the proverbs) are indirectly undermining their own image as desirable persons who are supposed to cater for the face wants of the other sex and for their own.

As Dwight Bolinger (1987), in the epigraph to this paper stated, sexism in language may be a “rusty” gun, but it is loaded and therefore dangerous. It is even more dangerous when we forget that it persists in our discourses. Helene Cixous wrote, “... even if we do not remember, our language remembers ...” (1994). It is therefore very crucial, especially with the growing interest in the relevance of oral

literatures to modern society, to think also of how oral performance and discourses could be divested of sexual (im)positionings. This study has tried to show that the proverbs of womanhood in Igboland reveal an attempt at denigrating and disempowering woman. Apart from this, the encoding of a negative image of womanhood in what is seen as an expression of the wisdom of the society has another disturbing significance: it seems to make such construction of negativism law, and as proverbs constantly used in discourse (and thus kept “alive”), the negative image and uncomfortable space allocated to woman are unfortunately made permanent!

#### NOTES

- (1) Many African proverbs “speak” about proverbs – a clear indication of the existence in African societies of a scientific or philosophical understanding of the nature and functions of language and discourse (Nwoga, 1975; Nze, 1990).
- (2) Illocutionary acts such as criticizing, querying, satirizing, and disagreeing, are generally face-threatening. Face could also be threatened indirectly through presuppositions and implications.
- (3) I am quite aware of the contrary but contradictory views by some scholars, particularly Catherine Acholonu and U.D. Anyanwu that patriarchy is/was not strong in Igboland. Both scholars argue that men and women co-exist on the basis of complementarity. Acholonu (1995), in *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, pursued an argument similar to Chinweizu’s in *Anatomy of Female Power* (1990), that it was not just that women shared power with men in Igboland, but that woman even controlled men. Anyanwu’s argument (1993) was even more controversial. According to him, “Men and women had specific roles but these were complementary. Men generally were the leaders or heads at all levels of the Igbo political structure. Women did not have equal access to power and authority with men. Yet women were not second class citizens in the Igbo political order”. If women were denied access to power how can we agree with Anyanwu that this (denial) “was not for promoting the political oppression of any one of the sexes”?
- (4) In translating the proverbs, I have tried to retain their figurative content so as to avoid an obscuration of the analogical references to womanhood.
- (5) The proverb contains the following presuppositions:
  - (a) There is/are difference(s) between “man” and “woman”,
  - (b) Man’s attributes are preferable to those of women, and
  - (c) Womanhood is undesirable.

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## Appendix

(Samples of Igbo proverbs with relationship to womanhood; arrangement and numbering are mine).

1. *Eri ago mere umunwanyi agbala afufu onu.* (Due to their habitual denial of favours they receive, women do not grow beards). [UC/MU/MSV/ ] [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
2. *Nwata nwanyi sijoo o na-eri ka o na-atoka.* (When a woman prepares a bad meal, she starts eating as if the meal is very tasty). [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
3. *O nweghi nwanyi sichara ofe si na o jogbuela onwe ya.* (No woman ever finishes cooking soup and says that the soup is so very bad). [UC/MU/SSV] FT.
4. *A na-emere nwanyi, o na-emere onye di ya mma.* (One would be doing good to a woman and she would be doing good to whoever she (truly) loves). [RC/MU/SSV] [UC/MU/SSV] FT.
5. *Onye jiri nwanyi buru ibu bu isi-adighi-aju.* (Any person who uses a woman as a pad in carrying a luggage is carrying the luggage without a pad). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.
6. *Mma nwanyi bu di.* (Husband is the beauty of a woman). [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
7. *Ogeri luo di abuo, o horo nke ka (ya) mma.* (A woman who has had two husbands should (be able to) choose which fo the husbands is preferable). [RC/MU/MSV] N.
8. *Aka ebe nwanyi gbara di ya na-eyi eziokwu.* (A testimony given by a woman against her husband resembles the truth). [UC/MU/SSV] [RC/MU/MSV] N.
9. *Nwanyi di ya nwuru o buru ukpa ahia tukwasa n'isi, o ma (anya) ihe gburu di ya.* (A woman whose husband has just died and she prepares to go to market knows what killed him). [RC/MU/SSV] N.
10. *Nwanyi mara obi di ya, o di ka o nyere di ya ogwu.* (When a woman knows the heart of her husband, it looks as if she has given him some love potion). [RC/MU/SSV] [UC/FU/MSV] nFT.
11. *Nwanyi mara dobe onwe ya o zaa Oriaku.* (When a woman conducts/keeps herself well, she answers consumer-of-wealth). [UC/MU/MSV] N.

12. *Ihe okwa nwanyi di ya lukporo nwanyi ozo na-ada bu “bia huru ihe m na-ahu, bia huru ihe m na-ahu.”* (What the sound of the mortar of a woman whose husband has taken a second wife says is “come and see what I see, come and see what I see”).  
[RC/FU/SSV] nFT.
13. *Nwanyi buru ibe ya uzo lokpu be di na-aka (ya) enwe mkpokpo aria.* (A woman who marries before her peer normally has more disused clay pots).  
[RC/FU/SSV] nFT.
14. *Nwanyi di ya choro ikpo asi adighi esite ya n’ofe uto.* (A woman whose husband has decided to hate cannot solve the problem by mere cooking of delicious soup).  
[RC/MU/SSV] N.
15. *Nwanyi muta isi ofe mmiri mmiri, di ya amuta ipi utara api tupu o suru.* (When a woman learns to cook watery soup, her husband learns to toy with the foo-foo before dipping it into the soup).  
[UC/MU/SSV] FT.
16. *Nwanyi si di gbakwaa oku, o bu onye ga-alu ya?* (A woman that says to hell with husband, who would marry her?).  
[UC/MU/MSV] FT.
17. *Nwanyi di ya nwuru si na o bu eziokwu na ya na-akwa akwa, ma ya na-echekwa onye ga-alu ya.* (A woman whose husband has (just) died says that it is true that she is crying (for the loss) but that she is also crying for the person that would marry her).  
[RC/MU/SSV] FT.
18. *Otu ukwu ha nwanyi ka o na-atukwasa di ya.* (However big a woman’s leg is, she places it on her husband).  
[UC/FU/MSV] nFT.
19. *Mekara nwanyi aga bu chooro ya di.* (Being so caring for a barren woman is to find for her a husband).  
[RC/MU/MSV] FT.
20. *Nwata nwanyi si kama nwunye di ya sichuo ya n’ofe, ya ayoro uru yoo okpukpu.* (A woman says (that) instead of her co-wife defeating her in the art of cooking soup, she would sieve both flesh and bone (in the meat)).  
[RC/MU/SSV] N.
21. *Nkita nwanyi zuru na-atagbu mmadu.* (A dog trained by a woman (always) bites people to death).  
[RC/MU/SSV] FT.
22. *Nwata nne ya na-ere ogiri amarala ijiji anya piara.* (A child whose mother sells melon paste knows the one-eyed house-fly).  
[RC/MU/MSV] FT.
23. *Nwanyi jere Nkwo Ogbe luo ogu, jee Afo Egbu luo ogu, jee Eke Mgbidi luo ogu, o bu ndi ahia na-acho ya, ka o bu ya na-acho ndi ahia?* (A woman who goes to Nkwo Ogbe Market and fights, goes to Afo Egbu Market and fights, goes to Eke Mgbidi Market and fights, is it the market people that are looking for trouble (from her), or is she the one that is looking for trouble (from market people)?  
[RC/MU/MSV] N.
24. *O naghi adi mma a gbachaa oso ka nwoke e bie ya ka nwanyi.* (It is not good to end a race like a woman after running it like a man).  
[UC/MU/SSV] [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
25. *Anu hu nwanyi O na-aruru okpa.* (When an animal (game) sees a woman, it sarts limping).



[RC/MU/MSV] FT.

26. *Nsiko si na ya e gwuole mmiri ukwu, gwuo mmiri nta, O wee buru ite ofe agadi nwanyi ga-eri isi ya.* (The crab says that it has swum in both large and small bodies of water, only to perish in an old woman's soup pot). [UC/MU/SSV] FT.

27. *Ajo nnwa na-aza aha nne ya.* (A bad child takes his/her mother's name (as surname)). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.

28. *A tuora gi ilu kowaara gi ya, ego e jiri lu nne gi furu efu.* (The bride price paid on your mother's head is a loss if a proverb, (after) being addressed to you, is explained to you). [UC/MU/SSV] [RC/MU/MSV] FT.

29. *Nwata muba elu, nne ya amuba akwa.* (If a child starts learning to climb (trees), his/her mother starts learning to cry). [RC/MU/MSV] N.

30. *Nne nwata lo ahia o di ka nke ibe ya agaghi alo.* (When a child's mother returns from the market, it looks as if another child's mother will not). [RC/FU/MSV] nFT.

31. *O nweghi onye na-asi na ofe nne ya siri ajoka.* (Nobody ever says that the soup cooked by their mother is very bad). [UC/FU/MSV] N.

32. *A na-echere ogeri, O na-eche okwa uri ya.* (One would be thinking of a woman's good but she would be thinking of her make-up platter (kit)). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.

33. *Nwanyi buru ohu, o si raba ya, na ohu bu ohu ya, ma mgbe o puta okwu, a choba onye nwe ohu.* (A woman carrying a vagina would ask to be sexed, that the vagina is her own, but when it causes trouble, the (real) owner (of the vagina) would be looked for). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.

34. *Nwa-agboho Ugwuta si nne ya na otu nwoke ka ya na-agara onwe ya, o wee tuburu ya raa. Nne ya wee si ya gaa rakwuru. O gaa, a rachie ya ozo.* (An Ugwuta (Oguta) girl told her mother that as she was going on her way, a man came and threw her down and sexed (raped) her. Her mother told her to go and retaliate. She went, and was sexed (raped) again. [RC/MU/MSV] FT.

35. *A naghi atu ikpu ukwu egwu maka na o bughi ya ga-ara onwe ya.* (One cannot be afraid of the wide vagina because it cannot sex itself). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.

36. *Na nwanyi na-agba oso na-ejide ara ya aka bu na oso esibeghiri ya ike.* (That a woman is running and holding her breasts is because the race is not yet very serious (for her)). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.

37. *Agadi nwanyi daa ndaada naabo, a guo ihe o bu na nkata onu.* (If an old woman falls twice, the number of items in her basket would be known). [RC/MU/MSV] FT.

38. *Nwaagadi nwanyi na-ari ugwu, ukwu wee fuba ya ufu. O wee si ugwu na o weta jekata-ukwu-afuba-ufu, ya eweta nodu-ala-zuo-ike.* (An old woman was climbing a hill and started having waist pains after some time. Then she told the hill that if it brought walk-along-and-then-have-waist-pain, she would also bring sit-down-and-rest).

[RC/MU/SSV] nFT.

39. *Agadi nwanyi a si ka e kunye nwa a nuru ohuru o si na ya enweghi eze, a si ya lekwa nwa ahu tabue?* (An old woman that is told to carry a newly born baby and she says that she has no teeth, is she being told to bite the baby to death?) [RC/MU/SSV] FT.
40. *Nwanyi obi oma ragburu onwe ya na di.* (The kind-hearted woman sexed herself to death). [UC/MU/SSV] FT.
41. *Akwuna ga-ebe akwa nnwa n'ula nka.* (A prostitute (assumed to be female) will cry for a baby in her old age). [UC/MU/SSV] [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
42. *Nwaagadi, nwanyi anaghi echefu egwu o muru n'agbogho* (An old woman never forgets the dance she learnt (how to dance) in her youth. [RC/MU/MSV] nFT.
43. *Nwanyi amaghi esi o na ogiri ezughiri ya ofe.* (When a woman is a bad cook, she says that she has not got enough melon paste). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.
44. *Asiri guba ogeri o banye a marachaa ajuba.* (When a woman is hungry for gossiping, she starts asking questions about what she already knows). [RC/MU/SSV] FT.
45. *Mma nwanyi bu akwa; mma nwoke bu ego.* (The beauty of a woman is (her) attire; the beauty of a man is money.) [UC/MU/SSV] FT.
46. *E gotera ogeri akwa mara mma, o jebe mgbaru onye di ndu* (when a beautiful dress is bought for a woman, she would pay a condolence visit in respect of somebody who is alive). [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
47. *Onye na-eche enyi ya nwanyi na-anu ikiti ukwu ndi mmuo.* (A man who is waiting for his girl-friend (at night) hears the foot-falls of spirits). [RC/MU/SSV] N.
48. *E gojuore nwanyi ngiga, amu a na-ada n'elu na-ada n'ala.* (When one fills a woman's basket with purchases, laughter would rend the air). [RC/MU/MSV] FT.
49. *Nwaagadi nwanyi laba nka o di ka o bu na e jigghi ego luo ya.* (When a woman is getting old, it would seem as if money (bride price) was not paid to marry her).
50. *Agwa bu mma nwanyi* ((Good) character is the beauty of a woman). [UC/MU/MSV] [RC/MU/MSV] N.